

Farewell to a rickety rusty mobile archive

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Recently, we bought a new car. It came decorated in yellow ribbons and a big bow. The dealer had performed a puja to protect the car on its journey from the showroom to its new home, so it arrived garlanded in red roses as well. The white car shone. It gleamed, it purred, it smelt of polish and emollient vapours: pure volatile delight.

Soon, having explained how to use the various features and posh controls, it was time for the mechanic to leave. He asked for the keys to the old car. In the excitement, we had forgotten that it was our last day with a somewhat dented, rusty, creaking ten-year-old vehicle. A sombre mood replaced the earlier euphoria as we watched it being reversed down the drive-way.

At times, the window would drop down, and stubbornly refuse to be raised. At others, the air-conditioner would choose blistering summer afternoons to blow hot air. Otherwise, the silver car had protected us, never let us down... always managing to have its tyres punctured at reasonable times, and in safe localities. It was an awful feeling to realise that it would be gone in minutes, without any fuss or farewell. There was no ceremony, no photograph marking this moment.

In a desperate attempt to buy time, I checked the seats, the boot, making sure nothing had been left behind. But what of the memories that jostled inside the car? The brown stain on the rear seat where my son spilled a kilo of coffee powder. The kitten that curled up beneath the bonnet and travelled unharmed all the way to the petrol bunk, where it was discovered. The horn that would catch cold in the rains and fall silent. The exact place above the left door where I spotted a big malevolent lizard while driving, and screamed, and the kind auto-driver who thwacked it out of the car. Driving myself to performances, practicing abhinaya last minute, unmindful of everyone staring curiously at a fully made-up and costumed dancer behind the wheel. The priceless look on my son's face when I let him drive, for the first time, down Elliotts Beach road.

The glove compartment always full of emergency supplies for my son— paper napkins filched from various restaurants, hand sanitizer, band-aid and pens for school— now held just a rubber band. The boot, usually packed pell-mell with muddy spiked shoes, shin guards, orange basketball and cricket kit-bag, was enormous and empty. The passenger seat had accommodated my son's growing limbs to the point where he could push his seat back no more. It was down to the last minute; the mechanic was fidgeting impatiently; I had to let go.

Watching the car being driven away by a stranger, I felt I had betrayed it somehow. Its new owners would never know a major part of its history. This car that held a decade of my life, would now be a mobile archive, keeping my secrets at a lost distance from me. I hoped wherever it went, it would be welcomed with a garland and the waving of lights.